

## Words, Words, Words: *Quantity* and *Quality* Matter

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The ability of humans to speak and understand spoken language evolved naturally thousands and thousands of years ago. Without explicit instruction, babies quickly begin to comprehend spoken language and learn how to use it to communicate their needs and thoughts. Reading, on the other hand, is an invention developed by humankind rather recently, only a few thousand years ago. If the ability to read were a natural process, all children would learn to read with the same predisposition for learning to speak and understand spoken language. However, only 32% of the nation's fourth-graders score at or above proficient levels of reading.<sup>i</sup> This dismal statistic corroborates a very important idea: Unlike learning to speak and understand spoken language, learning to read requires explicit instruction.

Another really important idea is that although learning to speak and understand spoken language are natural processes, the *quantity* and *quality* of the language children hear, understand, and use impact reading proficiency. A seminal study conducted over a 10-year period<sup>ii</sup> documented the language interactions between young children and their parents in professional, working class, and welfare families. Between 7 to 9 months and age 3, the children from the professional families were exposed to 30,000,000 more words than the children from the welfare families. Furthermore, the language interactions in the homes of the professional families were more robust and encouraging than in the other homes. In due course, the children's early language experiences predicted their reading and academic achievement as 9- and 10-year-olds. This and other studies have provided evidence that children living in poverty are disproportionately below average in their language development and are more likely to have reading difficulties. In truth, below-average language development, whether due to disadvantaged economic status or limited opportunities or language learning disabilities, impairs reading development, particularly comprehension.<sup>iii</sup> To ensure successful and critical reading, the *quantity* and *quality* of children's language must be nurtured through explicit engagement.

Because early language experiences are so vital to early reading success parents of infants and toddlers who are at risk for reading failure need to be partners in reading. Parents can engage their children in simple activities that promote language. For example, parents can speak a slow, cooing "baby talk" to their infants, using short segments and simplified language: "Baby had a nummy din-din! Mama's washin the yucky dishes. Splish, splash! Awwww, Mama's washin Baby's baba. Splish, splash! Spliiiiiish, splaaaash! Dishes all done! Time for beddy-bye." Research has demonstrated that universally<sup>iv</sup> infants pay greater attention to "baby talk" than to standard adult language. Parents accordingly can engage their toddlers in conversations using standard language at the grocery store, talking about the names, colors, and textures of fruits and vegetables, the shapes and sizes of product containers, the cold feel of a milk carton, or the aroma of freshly baked bread. These kinds of activities increase the *quantity* and *quality* of children's language. By engaging their children in purposeful language activities before they are even in preschool, parents can help put their children further down the road to reading success.

In sum, proficient reading is not a reality for all children. The absence of proficient reading is often the result of inadequate language development that is exacerbated by the inability to read text well. Better reading and brighter futures begin with instruction that promotes accurate and fluent decoding and instruction and opportunities that promote rich and deep oral language.

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<sup>i</sup> The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

<sup>ii</sup> Spring 2003 <<https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2003/TheEarlyCatastrophe.pdf>>.

<sup>iii</sup> Spring 2003 <<http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/spring2003/hirschsboral.cfm#back1>>.

<sup>iv</sup> August 2007<[http://www.gregbryant.org/IDspeech\\_PS.pdf](http://www.gregbryant.org/IDspeech_PS.pdf)>.